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## WOMEN IN PUBLIC WORSHIP IN THE CHURCHES OF PAUL.<sup>1</sup>

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The aim of this paper is simply exegetical. We do not raise the question whether Paul's practice in reference to woman's part in public worship is binding upon the churches of the present, but only the question what Paul's practice really was.

It is plain that this question has been answered from two passages, which seem, at first glance, most explicit, but whose interpretation is, in reality, still somewhat obscure, while a considerable number of pertinent data that give us glimpses into Paul's missionary practice in the matter in question, have been wholly ignored. And further, it is plain that one passage, whose teaching is evident (1 Cor. 2: 3-16), has been violently treated in order to make it harmonize with the two questionable passages. Thus the old law of interpretation, which requires us to explain the obscure by the clear, has been neglected, greatly to the embarrassment of many women, who, while respecting Paul, have desired to give expression to their Christian faith in the congregation of the Lord's people.

These two questionable passages (1 Cor. 14: 34-35; 1 Tim. 2: 11-12) have generally been understood as teaching that the apostle prohibited women from participating in public worship. Some writers, without any good exegetical reason, have thought that Paul's teaching on this subject was for his day only. Others, with an air of superior wisdom and liberality, have declared that Paul was narrow-minded on this subject, while they forget that he has given us the sublimest ideal of woman's relation to man which can be found in the Bible (Eph. 5: 22-33).

<sup>1</sup> Read before *The Chicago Society of Biblical Research*, Jan. 21, 1893.

We hope to show in this paper that Paul's position toward women in Christian work and worship was liberal, and that the ordinary interpretation of the two questionable passages is certainly wrong.

## I.

## THE NEGLECTED EVIDENCE.

It is worthy of notice, at the outset, that Paul makes honorable mention, by name, of more contemporary women than all the other New Testament writers together. This does not appear to be quite in harmony with the repressive policy which is generally supposed to have been pursued by the apostle in relation to women. But surely, the facts which we have in regard to this illustrious list of women who arose in the field of Paul's labors are most decidedly *not* in harmony with the usual view of the apostle's position.

Paul's first European sermon was preached to a little company of *women* (Acts 16: 3), and his first European convert was a *woman*, named Lydia (Acts 16: 14). Lydia was a business woman, had formerly lived in Asia Minor, but when she was converted by Paul she owned a home in Philippi. Her house became the home of Paul, Silas and Luke, while they remained in that city. Are we to suppose that in the following days of Paul's work in Philippi, when Lydia, his hostess, was moved to testify in the meetings for worship of the grace of the Lord toward her, Paul restrained her, and told her to keep silence in the church?

But there is other interesting information about Philippian women. Some eleven years after Paul's first visit in Philippi he wrote a letter from Rome to the Philippian church, in which he refers to two women who had labored with him in the Gospel — Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4: 2-3). The verb here used, which is translated by "labored," suggests heroic striving, and this striving was "in the Gospel," that is, in the service of the Gospel, for its advancement. These women had striven heroically with the apostle. They had done the same sort of work, apparently, as Clement, whose name is mentioned with theirs.

But whether it was the same specific sort of work which Clement did or not, it was doubtless public work. It was characterized by the same moral earnestness that characterized Clement's work, and was treated by Paul as worthy of the same commendation.

This work had been done when Paul first labored in Philippi. But now, eleven years later, Euodia and Syntyche are still laboring in Philippi, and are so prominent in the church that some disagreement between them is counted, by the apostle, worthy of mention in his letter to the church.

Thus, of the five persons in the Philippian church who are known by name, three are women. Are we to suppose that these three were silent when the little band of believers came together for conference and prayer? Were they prominent in the Christian work of Philippi and dumb before the Lord? Did they stand side by side with Clement and Paul in Gospel work, and yet not share with them in the social weekly worship?

In passing on to the next historic name, it may be noticed that in Thessalonica, the second European church, not a few of the chief women believed (Acts 17: 4); in Berea, the third European church, not a few Greek women of honorable estate believed (Acts 17: 12); and in Athens, where Paul had little success, of the two converts who are mentioned by name, one was a woman—Damaris (Acts 17: 34).

It is not exactly probable that Paul would have won so many of the chief women in these cities if he had been narrow-minded in reference to the sphere and power of women.

In Corinth Paul met with a Jewish woman by the name of Priscilla, who must have been one of the most prominent figures in the Christian circles of Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome. She was the wife of Aquila, a Jew of Pontus (Acts 18: 2). Paul came in contact with Aquila because he was of the same trade (Acts 18: 3). There is no direct evidence that Aquila and Priscilla were converted by Paul. They may have been, or they may have been Christians before Paul came to Corinth. They had recently come to Corinth from Rome, whence the Jews had been expelled by Claudius, because, as Suetonius says, they were constantly raising

tumults at the instigation of Christ. This seems to point to the existence of Christianity among the Jews in Rome as early as 50 A. D., and Aquila and Priscilla may have gone to Corinth as Christian Jews.

However that may be, they were among the most important coadjutors of Paul. The facts to be noticed here are (1) that Aquila and Priscilla had an important part in the training of Apollos, who was mighty in the Scriptures, and who is held by many to have been the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews (Acts 18: 24-28); (2) that they had a church in their house in Ephesus, whither they had gone with Paul (1 Cor. 16: 19); (3) that, later, they seemed to have returned to Rome, where also they had a church in their house (Rom. 16: 5); and (4) that they *both* were fellow-workers with Paul in Christ Jesus, to whom, he says, all the churches of the Gentiles were indebted (Rom. 16: 3-4).

It appears from these passages that Priscilla, no less than Aquila, was an instructor of one of the most prominent preachers of the Apostolic age; that Priscilla, no less than Aquila, gathered and conducted the church which was in their house in Corinth, and also the church which was in their house in Rome; and that Priscilla, no less than Aquila, was a fellow-worker with Paul, who was known among all the Gentile churches, and who had laid them all under obligation to herself. Of the three times that Paul mentions Aquila and Priscilla together, the name of Priscilla twice precedes, a suggestion that she may have been quite as efficient in Christian work as was her husband (Rom. 16: 3; 2 Tim. 4: 19).

Now is it probable that Priscilla had a church in her house in Ephesus and Rome, and that her lips were sealed in the meetings for conference and prayer? Is it probable that she could instruct Apollos, a learned Jew from Alexandria, and yet had nothing to say to the humble disciples who gathered in her house from week to week?

We pass on to notice the women who are mentioned in the last chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. It is of no significance for the present purpose whether this last chapter was a

part of the original Epistle to the Romans, or was part of a letter sent to the church at Ephesus. In any case it is from Paul, and contains valuable suggestions regarding the place of women in his churches.

The first woman of this chapter is Phœbe, of Cenchrea, the eastern suburb of Corinth. There was a church there, and Phœbe was a prominent servant of it, if indeed she was not an office-holder. It can not be said positively that she was or was not a deaconess, but she is certainly the only member of the church of Cenchrea whose name has come down to us. The fact that Paul commends her to the brethren in Rome, and bespeaks for her their assistance in whatsoever thing she might have need of them, indicates that she was engaged in some sort of Christian work. She was still a member of the church at Cenchrea, and apparently had gone to Rome in the interest of the Gospel.

Passing over Priscilla, of whom we have already spoken, the next woman whom Paul mentions is Mary, who had bestowed much wearisome labor upon the believers in Rome. Then he salutes two women who are still sharing the same sort of work in Rome, Tryphena and Tryphosa, and a third, Persis, perhaps of Persian blood, who had labored much in the Lord. Thus four women of the Roman church, beside Priscilla, are particularly commended for Christian service.

It is worthy of notice that of the seventeen *men* in the Roman church, beside Aquila, who are mentioned by name, only *one* is commended for his work. Of course it is not to be inferred that the others had not worked, but it is not plainly affirmed that they had. The suggestion is that the women had been more distinguished for Christian service than the men. Now it is not wholly probable that these women who are thus commended by Paul for their public work in Christ were not allowed a part in the weekly gatherings of the believers for worship.

One woman remains to be mentioned. Paul sends salutations from Rome by way of Colossæ to a certain Nympha of Laodicea, and to the church in her house (Col. 4:15). Here, then, is another Priscilla, but without an Aquila. Here is a Christian

woman in whose house the believers of Laodicea, or a portion of them, meet from week to week. Is it probable that Nympha gathered the church in her house, and yet never gave expression to her Christian faith in the meetings for worship?

It may be noted that in every case where a house-church is mentioned in Paul's letters, there is a *woman* in the house. There is the church at Laodicea in Nympha's house; the church in Ephesus in the house of Aquila and Priscilla; the church in Rome in their house; and the church at Colossæ in the house of Philemon and Apphia.

Before closing this section it may be remarked that there is not, in connection with any one of these women who labored with Paul in the Gospel, a single indication that the apostle debarred them from participating in public worship.

## II.

### THE PERVERTED EVIDENCE.

In 1 Cor. 11:3-16 there is a discussion of what the apostle thought an impropriety in the public worship. Women were praying and prophesying with unveiled heads. Paul thought that this was disgraceful. A woman, he says in substance, might as well cut her hair off or shave, as to pray or prophesy unveiled. The being veiled seemed to him important, because he regarded it as required by woman's subordination to man. This subordination was of God. Man is the glory of God, he says; woman, the glory of man. The man was not created for the woman, but the woman for the man. This subordination he softens somewhat a little later, when he says that, after all, the man is not without the woman, and that the man is *by* the woman as truly as the woman is *of* the man. He adds, as a last argument why women should be veiled, the fact that nature has given them long hair. This is an indication that their heads should be covered.

We are not here concerned with Paul's arguments for the covering of a woman's head when she prays or prophesies. They may be fanciful or not. The one point to be noticed is this: he assumes that women will pray and prophesy. He says no word

against their praying and prophesying, but he insists that they shall do it in a becoming manner.

Meyer assumes that this praying and prophesying which Paul allows *must* have been in *small* circles, and not in the gathering of the entire church. Women prayed and prophesied in a sort of unofficial neighborhood prayer meeting. But this does violence to the text; for (1) there is no allusion in chapter 11. to justify the statement that the praying and prophesying which Paul allowed were in a "small" circle. On the contrary, the context shows that the praying and prophesying were in the ordinary weekly meetings of the Corinthian believers. For in verses 17-18, which are a manifest continuation of the first section of the chapter, Paul plainly speaks of the regular weekly gatherings at which they celebrated the Lord's supper.

(2) Meyer's assertion, that the praying and prophesying of women in 1 Cor. 11:3-16 were in small circles, has no pertinency unless there was a clearly marked qualitative difference between a small circle and the entire circle of Corinthian believers. Without such a distinction, the concession that women could speak in a circle of ten is a concession of the whole point. Paul would not allow them to speak to ten and prohibit their speaking to twenty. But there is absolutely no trace of a difference in kind between the gatherings for worship in the churches of Paul, whether in Corinth or elsewhere. The church in the house of Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus was as truly a church as were the believers in Corinth. Paul did not fix the number of believers who should constitute a church, nor did he insist that a particular form of worship, or a definite set of officers, was essential to the existence of a church. Therefore, the view of Meyer, adopted by many others, is unexegetical and unhistorical.

Weiss<sup>1</sup> has the following remarkable interpretation of 1 Cor. 11:5-16. He says that the apostle *seems* to allow women to pray and prophesy in the church, but does not in reality. For Paul insists that they shall be *veiled*, and if they are veiled, why, then it is self-evident that they cannot pray and prophesy. That

<sup>1</sup> *Biblische Theologie des N. T.*, third German edition, p. 390.



is to say, Paul was really joking when he said that women might pray and prophesy. This attempt to get rid of the seeming conflict between 11:5 and 14:34 is quite as desperate as that of Meyer, and is not at all in line with the "neglected evidence" which we have adduced in reference to Paul's relation to women.

The intelligent reader who has not chapter 14:34 in mind, and is not seeking to harmonize it with chapter 11:5, will draw but one conclusion from the latter passage, viz., this: that Paul allowed women to pray and prophesy in the ordinary Christian gatherings in Corinth.

Hence, we must say that the liberal attitude of Paul toward women in Christian work, which appears in the evidence cited in the first section of this paper, is also illustrated in the Corinthian church.

### III.

#### THE QUESTIONABLE EVIDENCE.

Thus far we have found Paul laboring with women, and commending them highly for public Christian services. As far as the Corinthian church was concerned, we have seen that he took it for granted that women would pray and prophesy in the public worship.

We come now to the passages which at first glance seem to be at variance with the evidence already adduced. These are 1 Cor. 14:34-35—"Let the women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but let them be in *subjection*, as also saith the law. And if they would *learn* anything, let them ask their own husbands at home, for it is shameful for a woman to speak in the church." And 1 Timothy 2:11-12: "Let a woman *learn* in quietness with all *subjection*, but I permit not a woman to teach, nor to have *dominion* over a man, but to be in quietness."

It will be noticed (1) that in both these passages there is a reference to the woman's being in *subjection*. This is manifestly the end which the apostle has in view. This is the point at which the Corinthian women were going beyond what Paul thought becoming, and apparently some women were doing the

same thing in Ephesus. Their speaking is set over against their being in subjection. Any speaking is forbidden by these passages which is not consonant with due subjection to their husbands. This was the very point at issue in chapter 11:3-16. Paul said nothing there against woman's participation in public worship, but said only that she should do so in a manner in keeping with her divinely appointed relation to man. So here the same end is in view. The speaking which is prohibited is that which transgresses the limits of proper womanly subjection. One thing is pretty certain: if Paul in chapter 11 did not think praying and prophesying necessarily at variance with woman's subordination to man, he did not think so when he dictated chapter 14. Therefore, what he prohibits in chapter 14:34-35 cannot be praying and prophesying.

It will be noticed (2) that in both the questionable passages it is implied that the speaking which Paul prohibits was a speaking *to learn*. "If they would *learn* anything, let them ask their own husbands." "Let a woman *learn* in quietness, with all subjection." But it is evident that praying to God in public worship, or prophesying, was not speaking in order to learn. Prayer was a speaking to God, and prophesying was to the end of edifying others, not of learning.

The speaking, therefore, which both these passages imply, was plainly something other than modest praying and prophesying. This is the important point. Even if no plausible explanation could be given of the speaking or manner of speaking which is prohibited, that would not lessen the value of the result which has been reached. We know what was *not* prohibited.

We may suppose with Heinrici that the prohibition of chapter 14:34-35 was a prohibition of a forward asking of questions. The women were in the habit of interrupting the worship in this way. Therefore, Paul says that if they wished to *learn* anything they should put their questions to their husbands at home. Of course, such an asking of questions on the part of men would have been equally objectionable. The fact that men are not rebuked probably indicates that in Corinth the women were the chief offenders.

Why such an asking of questions should have been regarded as showing a lack of subjection is not said. It might be supposed that some of the men objected to it, and that in spite of their objecting the women persisted in asking questions.

In conclusion of the whole matter we would say, (1) that Paul's entire practice and his words, apart from the two questionable passages, are unalterably against the view that in these passages, he prohibits the women from participation in public worship; and (2) that an examination of these two passages themselves, far from *requiring* us to refer them to participation in public worship, shows that they contemplate something quite different from worship.

Paul is not guilty, then, in this matter, of self contradiction, and he is not to be charged with having excluded women from participating in all or any of the exercises of public worship. All believers, without distinction of sex, could come into the gatherings for worship and bring a psalm, or a teaching, or a revelation, or a tongue, or an interpretation (1 Cor. 14:26).